



Virtual Teams

About this Topic: Virtual Teams



Topic Mentors

Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps

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Topic Source Notes

Learn

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Steps

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Tips

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Tools

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What Would You Do?

What would you do?

Tom is excited. He has been chosen to lead an experienced, talented, and highly skilled team. He is also nervous. Team members are scattered around the globe in different cities, cultures, and time zones. Tom wonders how the team will communicate with each other when some members are asleep and others are awake. Will the team be able to collaborate well even though they come from such different cultures and backgrounds? How will they keep track of ongoing work? This impressive array of talent has the promise of great success. But working virtually also has the potential to hobble teams.

What would you do?

Tom can liken his role to that of Mission Control—guiding his virtual team toward a common goal. Many of the tasks Tom needs to complete for a virtual team are similar to those he would perform when leading any team. But when a team is working virtually, the chances of things going wrong are much greater. First Tom and his team should establish a clear vision and workable goals. Then Tom should work with his team to define roles and responsibilities as well as to establish explicit work processes. Tom should think about doing a "culture check," reviewing how team members feel about working conditions, hours, authority, delegation, communications, and other culturally determined activities. Tom should establish ways for people to connect regularly, such as a weekly conference call or Internet chat, in order to help the team build a virtual community. This will pave the road for better working relations during the project.

Tom's team has the requisite diversity and skill for great success. But, with team members scattered all over the globe, it also has the potential for great failure.

Topic Objectives

This topic helps you:

- Understand the benefits and challenges of virtual teams
- Create a strong foundation so that success is ensured
- Build a virtual community that promotes collaboration and ongoing communication
- Coach a team that you can't see
- Utilize technology to keep a virtual team organized, motivated, and productive

What is a virtual team?



The term *virtual team* refers to a team that, for the most part, is linked through communication that is not face to face—e-mail, voice mail, telephone, videoconferencing, and Internet-based forums. Many of today's teams are virtual to some extent—that is, they include members who are physically separated from their teammates: company employees in global locations, a representative of a key supplier, or perhaps an important customer. Some teams are entirely virtual; their members rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Nevertheless, virtual teams are real teams, and when they perform their missions well, they offer numerous advantages to companies.

The benefits of a virtual team

“ This market-creating or virtual prototyping pieces of our business allows the customer to have what he wants very rapidly...Essentially, we are creating products the customer wants virtually at his doorstep, much like one would order a pizza. ”
 –David Ross

- **Operate on a 24-hour cycle:** With virtual teams working literally around the world, a company can stay open 24 hours a day. At quitting time in Hamburg, the German members of a virtual team can forward the result of their day's work to their U.S. colleagues based in New York; those members will begin their day where the German colleagues left off, eventually forwarding the output of their day's work to another group in Sydney, Australia. Like relay racers, these team members keep the baton, or work, moving forward.
- **Tap the strength of diversity:** Virtual teams make it easier for organizations to bring together an extremely diverse group of people with varying skills, experiences, and knowledge about customers and business. Consider this example:

A team of product developers is working on a new electronic household appliance aimed at a worldwide market. By design, its team members are based in North America, Europe, and Asia and are native to those regions. This arrangement strengthens the team's ability

to recognize customer tastes and product use and to incorporate the safety and electrical standards of different countries.

The cultural diversity represented on this virtual team enhances its potential to develop a successful product. The achievement might not have been possible if the product had been developed by a team located in a single Research and Development facility.

The challenges of a virtual team

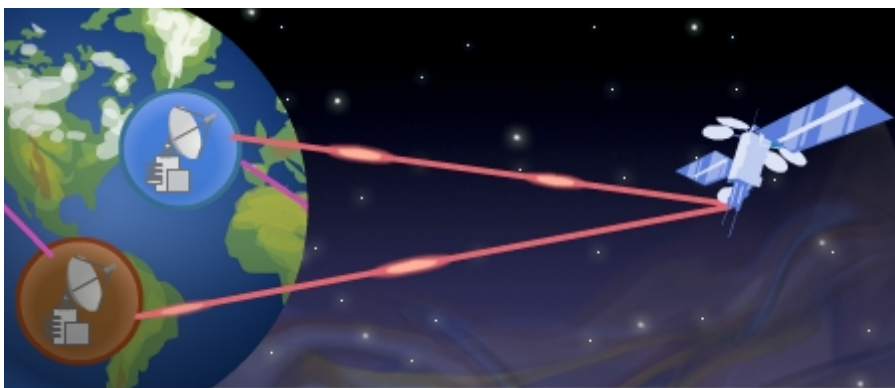
“ Virtual teams are live, not Memorex. They are most definitely teams, not electronic versions of the real thing. ”
–Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps

The principles that govern a virtual team are essentially the same as those for a team managed in one location. Managers of virtual teams must ensure clarity of goals, bring together the right set of skills, gain member commitment, and so forth. They must also encourage adequate collaboration and information sharing and create rewards that align effort with team goals. But what is different about *virtual* work, and what challenges do leaders of virtual teams face?

Virtual teams present two unique challenges:

1. **Management challenges:** How do leaders of virtual teams apply what they know about managing teams to coordinating virtual work?
2. **Technological challenges:** What tools do leaders of virtual teams need to keep members connected, communicating, and collaborating?

Define the vision and goals



All teams need clearly defined visions and goals, but a virtual team may find it harder to achieve such clarity than a same-place team does. After all, competent members of a same-place team may clarify a vague vision, adjust poorly defined goals, and transform an ill-defined project into a realistic one just by being near one another. They can easily talk in the halls, at lunch, and in the parking lot to straighten out problems or misunderstandings.

Virtual teams simply don't have that luxury. Like any other team, a virtual one will examine and adjust its objectives during the work process, but it should also map out the clearest possible vision and overall goals at the beginning in order to succeed. The goals need to be concrete and measurable—so

that at the end of the effort, the team can look back and know that it has achieved the desired results.

Determine roles and responsibilities

As with team vision and goals, the roles and responsibilities of virtual team members must be clearly defined from the beginning. Otherwise a virtual team can get bogged down in confusion, and team members can end up duplicating one another's efforts.

An early understanding of individual roles can help ensure that virtual team members take responsibility for separate tasks but see their work as part of the big picture. Working together, the team can see what needs to be done and make sure that someone is there to do it.

Clarify work processes and desired results

“The speed at which you can communicate defines how quickly you can make money. If I can respond to a customer in six hours anywhere in the world at any time, that's a competitive advantage.”

–Bob Buckman

The virtual workplace requires explicit, transparent *processes* (decision-making approaches, methodologies, work plans, procedures) and *outputs* (deliverables, records, milestones, results, documents). Transparency means that all team members understand and agree on the processes and desired outputs.

Transparency enables the team to produce consistent results: Everyone on the team knows what the team is trying to achieve—and how the team is going to achieve it.

Activity: Overcoming challenges

Managing a virtual team can be challenging. Test your ability to surmount obstacles to productivity and teamwork.

Darla is managing a virtual team consisting of seven members who are scattered around North America and four members based in London. The team must draft a proposal for an innovative re-design of a client's logistical network.

Which of the following strategies should Darla pursue?

- ☐ Have each team member draft a part of the proposal
Not the best choice. Re-designing a logistical network will require a cohesive plan that takes the whole team's insights into account. Having each team member independently produce one part of the proposal would not achieve this end.
- ☐ Hold teleconferenced brainstorming meetings to generate ideas
Correct choice. Teleconferenced meetings, if properly conducted, will allow each team member to give input, and will thereby leverage the whole team's experiences and

knowledge. It will also allow the challenging aspects of the re-design to be worked out collaboratively.

- ☐ Assign one team member to take ownership of the project and determine how best to complete the proposal

Not the best choice. As manager, Darla is responsible for creating working conditions that will be most conducive to the creation of the proposal. She must not burden one of the team members with a responsibility that should be her own.

Bronwyn is managing a virtual team that includes staff from SapCo and its international partners. Two weeks ago, her team embarked upon a new project. But yesterday, when she checked up on some of the team members, she found that several had no idea what they were supposed to be working on, and others had been doing work that was not congruent with the project's goals. Bronwyn realized that she had been communicating via e-mail with a few of the team members, but had not been thorough enough in her briefings addressed to the whole team. She has scheduled a video conference meeting as soon as possible.

During this meeting, which of the following steps should Bronwyn *not* take to get her team back on track?

- ☐ Find out how team members would prefer to communicate with one another

Not the best choice. This is actually a good step to take. The team's communication style hasn't been working. She needs to ask her team what they would prefer.

- ☐ Discuss the goals, timeline, and scope of the project, and work with team members to create a list of subtasks

Not the best choice. This is actually a good step to take. Bronwyn's team members are confused about what they should be working on, so she needs to clearly communicate project goals and develop a list of subtasks. The next step would be to create an online environment where all team members can share insights, see who is working on each subtask, and see which tasks have been completed. This transparency and information sharing among group members will give them the information they need to work on the right things without Bronwyn's constant intervention.

- ☐ Ask that all e-mails be CC-ed to the entire team

Correct choice. This would not be a good step to take. CC-ing every message to all team members would make it hard for team members to find the information that is pertinent for them. The truth is, e-mail might not be suitable as the team's primary mode of communication. Some virtual teams eschew e-mail altogether, in favor of instant messaging and group forums.

Howard leads a virtual team that offers internal technical support for a global conglomerate specializing in business process solutions. Howard has noticed that team members rarely interact with each other, which concerns him. Recent conversations confirm that morale is in decline and some team members are feeling isolated.

Which of the following steps should Howard take to improve morale and foster a sense of community?

- ☐ Solicit feedback on what is going well and what could be improved

Correct choice. By soliciting feedback, Howard will allow the team to express their frustrations. He will also gather information that will help him create a better collaborative environment, which will in turn increase the team's morale and motivation.

- ☐ Respond to performance issues immediately via e-mail

Not the best choice. While an immediate response to performance issues is important, e-mail is not the appropriate medium for this type of communication. Textual feedback will not allow Howard to use facial expressions and tone of voice to convey his message. Team members might misinterpret his efforts to address problems as criticism, or they might think he simply doesn't like them.

- ☐ Base incentives on individual performance

Not the best choice. Howard will not be able to foster a team identity by rewarding individual achievements. He should think of ways to reward the whole group and ensure that these rewards will be appealing to all team members.

Build commitment

Commitment to the team and its goals is critical for any team's success. People commit to things that they see as very important—either important projects or achievements important to their careers. If team members lack commitment, they will allocate their energy and time to other goals; they will participate in the team only to the extent that their schedules permit.

The most practical way to obtain commitment within a virtual team is to be very selective about whom you invite to join it. Within the constraint of required skills, leaders should pick people who have strong, natural interests in the team's goals.

Share leadership

The very reason for a virtual team's existence may be to pull together people with special expertise and experience who do not work together in the same geographic space. As on any team in which many highly competent people are brought together, leadership should be shared—because no one member has all the answers.

On a virtual team, leadership typically shifts depending on the task at hand. As a team leader, you should be willing to share the amount of direction and control that you exert over a project. Likewise, team members should be willing to offer their guidance and managerial expertise as needed.

For example, suppose a virtual team has been charged with developing a new consumer product. How might team members share leadership? In this case, the member of the team who has the most technical expertise might take responsibility for evaluating and selecting the electronic components for the product. Meanwhile, the team member with the greatest knowledge of customer needs might make

decisions about product features. If an unexpected conflict with a supplier over component pricing crops up, the team member with the strongest negotiation skills might take charge of resolving the conflict.

Key Idea: Perform a "culture check"

Key Idea

If members of a virtual team are global or new to the group, it's useful to do a "culture check" to address the unique challenges that arise in virtual teams. Consider asking team members how they feel about the following:

- **Working conditions:** How much will team members be expected to travel? What resources will be available to them for getting their work done?
- **Hours of operation:** How many hours per day or week are team members expected to work? How early or late are team members expected to be available for phone conferences?

For example, if the virtual team you're leading has a member in Taiwan and one in Germany, when can the team confer by phone so that some members aren't participating in phone conferences in the middle of the night (their time)?

Expectations about work during weekends or holidays, or overtime, may also vary. As the team leader, you need to carefully consider these questions and encourage team members to clarify expectations.

- **Authority and delegation:** Who will be responsible for making what types of decisions as the team does its work? Who has the authority to assign work to specific team members?
- **Communication patterns:** What are team members' assumptions about appropriate and acceptable communication—in particular, what is considered polite or impolite communication?

For instance, in some countries, a manager who does not maintain a proper distance and sharply defined role in his or her working relationships with subordinates loses respect. In such cultures, managers may not welcome shared decision making.

By clarifying these issues before starting its work, a virtual team can avoid misunderstandings and resentments later.

Your virtual team will probably face geographical and cultural barriers. As the team leader, you can preempt cultural misunderstanding by asking your team members the right questions.

Leadership Insight: Coaching across cultures

I think the whole idea of managing a virtual team or a global team is one that scares a lot of people, quite frankly, because you tend to hire people who are like you or your communication

style seems to resonate better with someone like you. And you're more comfortable with managing someone who sits near you.

And so when you think that you are in Europe managing a team of people situated in the Americas and throughout the Asia-Pacific region — including Australia, Southeast Asia, and India — that gets a bit daunting. And then when you think about communication style and culture as an overlay to the issues that are just the day-to-day issues of managing people, it does become a bit overwhelming.

I think of an example of an executive vice president who I was working with in Europe within the last couple of months who had been involved in the individual development plan of one of his senior vice presidents located in Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian executive had participated in the 360 process, and his feedback looked very different from the European boss's feedback.

And what the boss had to understand was that neither was right and neither was wrong — they were just different; and part of that difference was the way that people interacted with one another and what the whole idea of virtual teams looked like. And it looked different if you were sitting in Southeast Asia versus London versus one of the Americas.

So I recall going back and doing some research prior to one of our online coaching conversations. Actually, I jotted down several notes and I looked for ways to interject these questions thoughtfully into the process to help this executive take a look at his own coaching style, in his own paradigms, to see how are those in line with this person's and how are they different from that person's.

And then I had to challenge him a couple of different ways to look at the same situation but look at it from different angles to realize that he had a very European view of the rest of the world, which was different from my view of the rest of the world, and as a result that everyone else around the world have a different view of him as well.

So as a result of that learning, he had the opportunity to take a step back, and what we did — how we changed behavior — was I coached him in formulating some questions, open-ended and appreciative-inquiry questions, so he could go back to his executive in Southeast Asia and ask basically the same questions that I had asked him as a way of seeking to gain information instead of telling, which was typically the way that he would have managed that situation.

As a result, they have now taken that set of questions, and that set of questions is almost an opening template for each and every coaching conversation; and there are a couple of questions that they have interjected into their regular staff meetings so that they have a check-in that puts everyone on the same playing field, a level playing field, so that as they are discussing things, they understand that the responses and the communication style and the culture of each person in each part of the world are going to be very different. And they are finding ways to appreciate those differences instead of looking for ways to defend their own position.

Asking thoughtful questions creates constructive dialog across cultural gaps.

Alan Brewer

Director of Executive Development and Global Learning, Turner Broadcasting

Alan is the Director of Executive Development and Global Learning for Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. He is responsible for the conception,

development, and execution of global learning strategies for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA); Australia, India and Asia (AsiaPac); and the Americas.

He has been instrumental in combining performance management, talent management, succession planning, and talent review with Time Warner People Development initiatives and Turner's Executive Development Programs. In addition to multiple certifications and professional designations, Alan holds a Bachelor of Arts in communications and master's degree in management, both from Mercer University.

Build team bonds



Individuals who identify with a team or a group generally exhibit the behaviors that form the bedrock of team success; they work harder, collaborate more fully, and, in many cases, put the interests of the team ahead of their own. Identity with a group usually goes hand in hand with trust, which in turn encourages information sharing and collaboration.

Team identity doesn't happen naturally in virtual teams, and for obvious reasons. If the team and its members are out of sight, they are also out of mind. In the worst cases, the virtual team is a collection of strangers with few, if any, social bonds. While it is difficult to develop a sense of identity with a group of people whom you seldom see, leaders of virtual teams can take steps to strengthen team identity.

Hold a launch meeting

If possible, gather everyone together for a face-to-face project launch meeting—even if it is the only time that team members can be convened during the course of the team's work. While the group is together, create opportunities for members to get acquainted on a personal level. The goal is to create small-group cohesion. For example, introduce each member and ask him or her to say something about his or her background, special skills, hobbies, personal interests, and so forth.

Over the course of the one- or two-day launch meeting, assign people to subgroups, each charged with discussing a particular facet of the task. Rotate people in these subgroups so that everyone gets a chance to meet and work with everyone else. At the end of the launch meeting, take a group picture, and send copies to all participants.

Set up times for people to talk to each other

Here are some ideas:

- **Encourage periodic face-to-face meetings as the work progresses.** If the team is not too broadly dispersed—and if the budget permits—bring people together again at key junctures (e.g., when several new members have joined the team, when key decisions must be made, or when the next phase of the project must be planned and assigned). Use videoconferencing if physical meetings are not feasible. Doing so will reinforce the group bonding that occurred at the team launch. If you cannot bring the entire team together, do so for important subgroups.
- **Find times when people can get together.** This is bound to be difficult for teams that span continents and time zones, so schedule regular meeting times for conference calls or online discussions, and arrange a process for bringing up concerns about the project. This will help team members feel comfortable about sharing comments and will promote a team approach instead of encouraging people to work individually.

One warning: If the organization's headquarters is in the United States, don't schedule conference calls or Internet chats so that the Asian or Australian team members must always take calls or be online during regular U.S. business hours, which would be in the middle of the night for them. Doing so will annoy your partners on the other side of the globe. Instead, alternate conference call or Internet chat times so that any time-zone inconvenience is shared equally.

- **Reiterate the team's common goals.** Frequently revisit the team's shared goals and purpose to remind people that the work they are doing is important not just to the team, but to the organization as well.

Activity: Problem prevention

A face-to-face launch meeting can help create small-group cohesion that can benefit the team throughout the life of the project. Practice structuring a launch meeting that will ward off the unique problems that virtual teams experience.

In Greg's new position at DyCorp, he will be leading a virtual team with members based in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Greg has scheduled a three-day face-to-face launch meeting with the entire team. He realizes that he will have many problems if the team members do not identify with the group and trust one another. His goals for the launch meeting are to facilitate a sense of team identity and lay a foundation of communication that will prevent confusion later on.

Below are some of the activities Greg is considering for the launch meeting. Select whether each activity would help build team identity, prevent misunderstandings, or whether it would not advance his goals and should not be part of the launch meeting.

Proposed activity: Frequently break the team into smaller groups, and rotate the composition of the groups

☐ Build team identity

Correct choice. Breaking the team into subgroups and rotating the members of each subgroup will give everyone a chance to meet and work with everyone else.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Breaking the team into subgroups and rotating the members of each subgroup will give everyone a chance to meet and work with everyone else.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Breaking the team into subgroups and rotating the members of each subgroup will give everyone a chance to meet and work with everyone else.

Proposed activity: Find out team members' expectations regarding work during weekends, holidays, and overtime

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Finding out team members' expectations regarding work during weekends, holidays, and overtime helps to prevent scheduling confusion.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Correct choice. It is critical for Greg to talk with the team about working overtime and weekends—and to find out which holidays they expect to take off—so that he can schedule projects accordingly.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Finding out team members' expectations regarding work during weekends, holidays, and overtime helps to prevent scheduling confusion.

Proposed activity: Present a team logo and slogan

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Presenting a team logo and slogan is not a good idea because with team members from diverse cultural backgrounds, it might be difficult to find a slogan and logo that would carry the appropriate meaning for all of them. Also, if team members did not take an active role in creating the logo and slogan, they might not be receptive or enthusiastic.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Presenting a team logo and slogan is not a good idea because with team members from diverse cultural backgrounds, it might be difficult to find a slogan and logo that would carry the appropriate meaning for all of them. Also, if team members did not take an active role in creating the logo and slogan, they might not be receptive or enthusiastic.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Correct choice. With team members from diverse cultural backgrounds, it might be difficult to find a slogan and logo that would carry the appropriate meaning for all of them. Also, if team members did not take an active role in creating the logo and slogan, they might not be receptive or enthusiastic.

Proposed activity: Create strict procedures and standards to cover all aspects of communication and work

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Creating strict procedures and standards to cover all aspects of communication and work is not a good idea. While some procedures and standards are necessary to guide the team's work, Greg should be careful not to regulate the team's activities to the point of hindering collaboration, innovation, and spontaneous problem solving.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Creating strict procedures and standards to cover all aspects of communication and work is not a good idea. While some procedures and standards are necessary to guide the team's work, Greg should be careful not to regulate the team's activities to the point of hindering collaboration, innovation, and spontaneous problem solving.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Correct choice. While some procedures and standards are necessary to guide the team's work, Greg should be careful not to regulate the team's activities to the point of hindering collaboration, innovation, and spontaneous problem solving.

Proposed activity: Schedule group dinners and some fun activities that will appeal to everyone

- ☐ Build team identity

Correct choice. It's a great idea for Greg to provide opportunities for the team to get to know each other in a more informal environment. However, he will have to make sure that meals and activities will be appropriate and appealing for team members with diverse cultural backgrounds.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Scheduling group dinners and some fun activities that will appeal to everyone helps build team identity. It provides opportunities for the team to get to know each other in a more informal environment.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Scheduling group dinners and some fun activities that will appeal to everyone helps build team identity. It provides opportunities for the team to get to know each other in a more informal environment.

Proposed activity: Discuss, with input from the team, the team's purpose, goals, and impact on DyCorp's future success

- ☐ Build team identity

Correct choice. Greg must ensure that the team has a clear vision of their purpose, goals, and their impact on DyCorp's profitability. Having a shared purpose will unite the team.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Discussing the team's purpose, goals, and impact on DyCorp's future success will help build team identity. This activity will ensure that the team has a clear vision of their purpose, goals, and their impact on DyCorp's profitability. Having a shared purpose will unite the team.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Discussing the team's purpose, goals, and impact on DyCorp's future success will help build team identity. This activity will ensure that the team has a clear vision of their purpose, goals, and their impact on DyCorp's profitability. Having a shared purpose will unite the team.

Proposed activity: Dispense with synchronous meetings in favor of e-mail, forums, and other forms of communication

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Dispensing with synchronous meetings in favor of e-mail, forums, and other forms of communication is not a good idea. It is sometimes necessary to have synchronous meetings in spite of the time-zone inconvenience. Also, team members may begin to feel isolated if they never interact with teammates in real time.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Dispensing with synchronous meetings in favor of e-mail, forums, and other forms of communication is not a good idea. It is sometimes necessary to have synchronous meetings in spite of the time-zone inconvenience. Also, team members may begin to feel isolated if they never interact with teammates in real time.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Correct choice. While it will be necessary for Greg to minimize the number of synchronous meetings due to the time-zone inconvenience, there will be situations that demand them. Also, team members may begin to feel isolated if they never interact with teammates in real time.

Proposed activity: Talk with team members about expectations for travel and their hours of availability for synchronous meetings

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Talking with team members about expectations for travel and their hours of availability for synchronous meetings prevents confusion. This activity will prevent misunderstandings down the road.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Correct choice. Talking with team members about their expectations will prevent misunderstandings down the road.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Talking with team members about expectations for travel and their hours of availability for synchronous meetings prevents confusion. This activity will prevent misunderstandings down the road.

Proposed activity: Ask team members to introduce themselves and say something about their background, skills, interests, and hobbies

- ☐ Build team identity

Correct choice. Having team members say something about themselves will provide starting points for conversations among themselves. (For example: You like to fly remote controlled airplanes? Tell me more about that.)

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion. Asking team members to introduce themselves and say something about their background, skills, interests, and hobbies helps build team identity. Having team members say something about themselves will provide starting points for conversations among themselves.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Asking team members to introduce themselves and say something about their background, skills, interests, and hobbies helps build team identity. Having team members say something about themselves will provide starting points for conversations among themselves.

Proposed activity: Schedule a daily videoconference meeting to keep the team connected

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not prevent confusion.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Correct choice. It might be excessive to have a synchronous meeting every day, especially since team members are spread across different time zones. Team members may become frustrated or not participate in the meetings if they feel their time would be better spent on their tasks than in meetings.

Proposed activity: Discuss who will be responsible for making which types of decisions

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Discussing who will be responsible for making which types of decisions helps prevent confusion. It is important to understand team members' perceptions of how decision making will work within the team.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Correct choice. Greg might offend or confuse his team members if he does not understand their perceptions of how decision making will work within the team.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Discussing who will be responsible for making which types of decisions helps prevent confusion. It is important to understand team members' perceptions of how decision making will work within the team.

Proposed activity: Ask team members which types of communication they regard as appropriate or inappropriate; polite or impolite

- ☐ Build team identity

Not the best choice. This proposed activity does not build team identity. Asking team members which types of communication they regard as appropriate or inappropriate; polite or impolite prevents confusion.

- ☐ Prevent confusion

Not the best choice. Misunderstandings would almost surely occur if Greg does not help the team to discuss cultural preferences on the type and tone of appropriate communications.

- ☐ Not a good idea

Not the best choice. This proposed activity is actually a good idea. Asking team members which types of communication they regard as appropriate or inappropriate; polite or impolite prevents confusion.

Key Idea: Encourage collaboration

Key Idea

The point of a team is to get people with complementary capabilities to work *together* on important tasks. But is collaboration possible between virtual team members?

The answer is yes—collaboration is not only possible, it can also be strengthened.

Here are some tips for encouraging collaboration in virtual teams:

- **Promote collaborative work.**

Find as many opportunities as possible to get people working together.

For example, encourage several team members to solve an unexpected problem that has cropped up.

Ask a subgroup of team members to evaluate potential new suppliers for a product component and select the best one.

- **Recognize and praise collaborative behavior when you see it.**

As the team's work progresses, watch for accomplishments that enable the team to excel, and communicate your appreciation to members.

For example, if several members collaborated successfully to solve a problem, send an e-mail to all team members expressing your appreciation and explaining how the achievement helped the team overall.

Your goal is to foster the feeling that team members are dependent on one another to achieve success—and that each member brings vital, complementary skills and knowledge to the effort.

- **Reiterate the team's common goals.**

Frequently revisit the team's shared goals and purpose to remind people that the work they are doing is important not just to the team, but to the organization as well.

How can you as a team leader keep virtual team members united and committed to a mutual goal? Find ways to help team members collaborate across the geography gap.

Create open lines of communication



Members of a virtual team don't have access to coffee-room conversations or opportunities to detect distress signals through one another's body language and gestures. For this reason, it's important to create open lines of communication to ensure that team members easily send messages to one another. These open lines of communication enable team members to establish mutual trust—perhaps the most vital ingredient in any high-performing team's ability to succeed.

Gain agreement about process and results

“Great discoveries and improvements invariably involve the cooperation of many minds.

—Alexander Graham Bell

Ensuring that everyone on a virtual team understands processes and desired results requires thoughtful discussion and ongoing updates. Before a team begins its work, leaders should gain agreement from members on the following questions:

- What exactly is the team setting out to accomplish?
- When must we accomplish it?
- How will we make decisions?
- Who is responsible and accountable for the different parts of the project?
- How will we achieve our goals?
- How we know when we have finished our work?
- How will we monitor progress and performance?
- How will we measure our results?

Document expectations about processes and results

While agreeing on processes and results is important, managers also need to document what's been decided. This document may take the form of a written work plan or team charter that's e-mailed to all team members or made available on a team intranet site. Another useful document is a team roster—a list of all team members, their role on the team, the best way to contact them, their location and time zone, and the hours during which they are available for participating in phone or video conferences and responding to e-mails.

The key is to ensure that the information is accessible to every team member—and that everyone is "on the same page" with what has been decided.

Key Idea: Keep everyone informed

Key Idea

Establish procedures for keeping everyone updated on what has been accomplished and which decisions have been made as the team's work progresses. The challenge is to ensure that team members communicate progress on their parts of the project, and that the resulting information and updates circulate easily among all team members.

Leaders of virtual teams should decide who will submit what kinds of information to whom, and how often they will do it. For example, will team members e-mail you or another team member a weekly progress report? Will you or someone else on the team be responsible for contacting team members to gather such information? Settle on a method, and then stick to it so that everyone knows what to expect.

Also make sure that everyone has easy access to updates. This can be done in several ways:

- Send out a weekly e-mail that lists which decisions have been made and what their status is—for example, "We've selected the vendor for the XYZ component, and Kuan is going to negotiate the contract. We still need to decide how to fix the low-voltage problem on the instrument. Paolo, Rana, and Gerta will discuss this week and propose a solution.
- Hold a weekly videoconference or telephone conference to assess the effectiveness of the team's processes and to make any needed procedural changes.
- Post team progress reports and the status of decisions on an Intranet site, and require all team members to consult the site every Monday and Wednesday morning to stay current.

Be consistent and reliable in ensuring that information flows fluidly. That way, team members know what to expect and can rely on getting the information they need—when they need it.

The success of a virtual team depends on consistent and convenient communication. Which method works best for your virtual team?

Leadership Insight: Inconvenience everybody equally

Running a virtual team is an interesting challenge, especially if people are spread across countries and time zones and different levels of language proficiency. At one time I had a team of about 17 people spread across 10 countries and we needed to have, if not weekly, at least every-other-week meetings. And, boy, I learned a lot from that experience — it was an incredible learning experience for me. And the challenge was that somebody is always on the meeting in the middle of the night, somebody is always the only person and other people are in small groups.

And so we thought a lot and experimented a lot with what would actually work, and we came up with a model that we called "inconvenience everybody equally." And that meant that we rotated the time in the meeting so that at some point everyone, whether they were in London or Berlin or New Delhi or New York, somebody was always up in the middle of the night, somebody was always in the middle of their normal workday. And it meant that everybody got a chance to be drowsy and falling asleep and everybody got a chance to be wide awake and sort of full of energy and at the peak of their day.

We also came up with a rule — which was very hard to enforce at first — which was even if there were a number of you in one location, you all needed to be on the phone separately, not in a room together. It completely changes the dynamics of the meeting, if some number of people are in one place and can see each other and talk to each other kind of offline.

So even though a number of us were sitting in a row in cubicles in an office, we made sure that in fact we all got on the phone equally with everybody else. That means no side conversations. That means everybody needs to put their expression into their voice and the way that they talk rather than rely on facial expressions.

We also learned that it was really important to have an agenda go out ahead of time, particularly when you have people who are speaking a second or a third language. That gives them a chance to read and get familiar with the content and what's going to be done.

And finally we made sure that we kept the agenda to those things that really mattered to everyone who was on the phone. If there are 17 people on the phone, then what you don't want to do is have people getting bored and losing their sort of sense of involvement and engagement in the meeting.

So again, just to kind of recap, it was inconvenience everybody equally, change the times of the meetings, make sure that no one is sitting in a small group together but that everyone is having the experience of being on the phone, and have a clear agenda with good materials sent out in advance. Those are the things that I learned.

With a team scattered across time zones, someone's always going to be taking 3 a.m. calls. Make sure that everyone shares the burden.

June Delano **Founding Partner, The ClearLake Group**

June Delano is a Managing Partner of Pivotal Leadership, a leadership consulting firm in Southeast Asia, and a Founding Partner of The ClearLake Group, a global advisory firm focused on strategy and organization.

June has consulted in many industries and has led projects in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Americas. She is known for a deep understanding of the relationship between strategy, culture and learning, as well as ground-breaking approaches to leadership development.

She was a leader of the executive development practice at The Monitor Group, and previously held multiple positions at the Eastman Kodak Company, including Director of Worldwide Learning and Development, and Director of Executive and Management Development.

She has authored multiple articles, including "Communicating Across Differences: The Case for Becoming a Cosmopolitan Coach," published in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations.

June holds a Bachelor of Arts in journalism from Michigan State University and a Master of Science in organization development from

American University. She has studied psychology, leadership, and organization development at The Fielding Institute, the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, and NTL Institute.

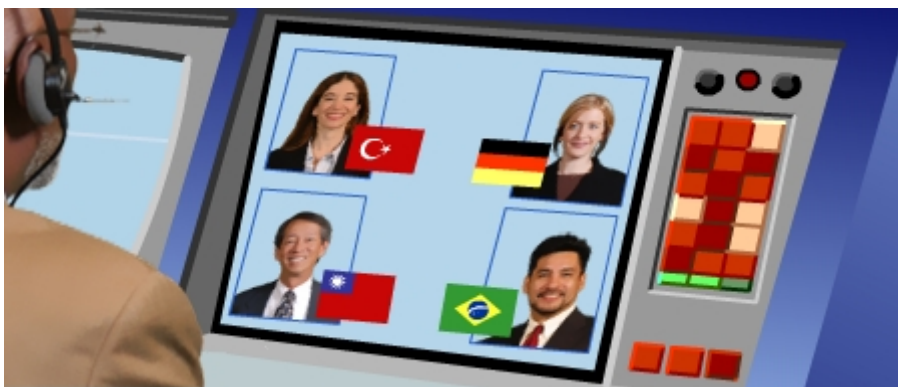
Identify opportunities for coaching



In a team whose members are located in one place, the team leader can usually improve performance through coaching. For example, consider the following situations: one team member doesn't know how to work with others; another member must develop a presentation but hasn't ever used a presentation software program; yet another is having trouble developing a budget report. In each instance, the team leader should coach the person needing assistance.

A virtual team has similar opportunities and needs for coaching, but getting the job done is more difficult. With members scattered in different locations and different time zones, the communications required for effective coaching are less available. A virtual team leader cannot simply walk over to the other person's office and demonstrate how to use presentation software or to set up a budget report.

Facilitate communication



Here are some tips for encouraging the easy communication you need to mentor:

- **Maintain strong lines of communication:** Keep lines of communication open so that team members know what's going on and what problems need addressing to move the team's work forward. For example, consider scheduling weekly or daily conference calls to identify challenges and develop solutions.
- **Encourage team members to help one another:** Make sure members of the team know about one another's unique skills and knowledge. Suggest that they call on one another for coaching assistance if needed.

- **Set intersecting office hours:** Flexible hours are a big advantage of virtual work. But *too* much flexibility can make it hard for team leaders to reach members who need coaching, or for members to coach one another. Designate intersecting times when all members can be reached, and make sure people know when it's okay to call each other. Work out compromises for different time zones and sleep habits. Make a rule to respect agreed-upon hours for communication.

Clarify priorities and build team identity

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is a process; working together is success.”
—Henry Ford

As you consider how to mentor members of a virtual team:

- **Prioritize tasks:** Performance problems can arise in teams when people get confused about priorities. Remind your team that "instant" does not always have to mean "urgent." E-mail, overnight deliveries, and voice mail messages don't necessarily require an immediate response. Prioritize tasks by their importance to the project—not according to the way a request was delivered. Have team members indicate the importance of e-mails by marking them "high," "normal," or "low" priority before sending.
- **Ensure that virtual team members are considered part of the team:** In some teams, several members may work on-site together while other members work in a virtual space. If some team members leave a company's workspace and move to a home office, the change can be difficult for both those who leave and those who remain. It's easy for requests made by coworkers who are physically present to take priority over requests made by virtual teammates. As the team leader and coach, you can make sure virtual teammates are still considered members of the team. How? Remind people to include all teammates in important communications, point out virtual teammates' contributions, and organize as many face-to-face get-togethers as possible.
- **Ease isolation:** Isolation can be a problem when people accustomed to working in an office with colleagues suddenly find themselves spending a lot of time alone, away from the office. Help such team members to obtain the social contact they need. For example, suggest more phone calls, e-mails, lunch meetings, or trips to the local office. Encourage employees, whenever possible, to look to other team members for support. If team members work from home, strongly suggest they get out of the house every day: They might have lunch with a colleague, meet associates, or visit friends.

Key Idea: Address performance problems

Key Idea

Every performance problem has a source, and it's the coach's job to find it. If a team member is missing deadlines or falling behind, consider some of the following approaches:

- Contact the person and ask why. If distractions are getting in the way, find out the source of the distractions.
- Ask what you can do to help, or what changes the person might make to improve performance.

For example, if the person seems overwhelmed by an assignment, work together to figure out how to break the large task into smaller tasks. Or consider assigning portions of the work to other team members who have more time.

- Identify barriers to achievement. Perhaps the team member is having difficulty working with another member of the team due to cultural differences, for example.
- Look for opportunities to help that person bond with other members of the team.
- Ensure that the team member understands and agrees to the team processes and desired outputs. At the same time, define success—what does the team member need to do to satisfy your expectations?
- Make the consequences of continued poor performance very clear. Then be sure you communicate when the team member's performance improves. With a virtual team, that may not be as easy as walking down the hall. Consider sending an e-mail or recognizing the person's achievements in a team meeting.

When a team member underperforms, the entire group suffers. As the team leader, it's your responsibility to diagnose the team member's problem and fix it.

Assess technology needs

In addition to handling management challenges associated with virtual teamwork, leaders must also assess technology needs and help their teams implement different types of technologies.

Technology provides the linkages through which participants can share ideas and information, coordinate activities, and build bonds of trust. Virtual team leaders and members don't need to be technology experts, but they must be willing and able to use or learn the technology that's required to do the job.

Common sense, the team's combined knowledge, and expert help from an organization's Information Technology department can help a virtual team leader find the most appropriate technology for the team's purposes. So, too, can answering the following questions:

- **Who?** Who's on the team? Are they ready to learn about and use technology? Gauging team members' attitudes toward and familiarity with technology will give you a realistic idea of what you can expect them to do with technology, and how long it might take them to get up to speed.
- **What?** What does the team need to do? What is the nature of the team's work? What software do you currently use? What compatibility issues are involved? What information do you work with now? What is the most common technology platform in the organization? What are your team's communications needs? Answering these questions will help you plan for new technology or upgrades before the team's project gets under way.
- **When?** When is your team's project scheduled to begin and end? Acquiring and installing new technology takes time, as does training people in its use. Does your overall project schedule have room for technology acquisition, installation, and training? If not, how might you gain time for these things?
- **Where?** Where will you and other team members be when you send or receive information? Where does information you need reside? (In one or more databases in specific locations?) Track the desired flow of information—where it will come from and where it should go. You'll be better prepared to design an information system that suits your team's needs.

- **How?** How can you best use technology that your company and team already have? How flexible do you need to be in your use of technology? How much can you afford to spend? Analyze the possibilities of using what you have. Adapting existing technology to your needs will probably be the cheapest course to follow and may make it easier for team members to master the technology. Anticipate technology needs that may come up during the course of the project. Try to build in technology solutions today that can be adapted to your needs tomorrow.

E-mail

Everyone on a virtual team needs—at the very minimum—an e-mail address that can be accessed from anywhere. If you will rely heavily on e-mailing attached documents, check for compatibility and compression issues with each team member. Ideally, however, try to avoid sending documents by e-mail and instead encourage team members to post all documents to the team Web site.

Establish protocols for use—everyone on the team should know when, why, and to whom to send e-mails. Be clear about who must be copied on what:

- **Don't overdo it.** There's probably no need to copy every person on the team list on every e-mail correspondence you send out. Nobody wants to receive massive amounts of irrelevant e-mail.
- **Don't underdo it.** Make sure that everyone is informed about decisions that affect them, and that people who need to be in on decisions are consulted. E-mails can help create virtual "paper trails," and can be important documents down the line if misunderstandings or conflicts arise.

If possible, also consider alternatives to e-mail, like using discussion capabilities available on team Web sites. Threaded discussions are more transparent to team members and offer another significant benefit: they are less time-consuming to review than individual e-mails.

Activity: Lost in translation

Identify the phrases that may not be universally understood.

Read each example sentence from an e-mail to a virtual team and decide which would be clear to team members from around the globe and which would not convey the desired meaning.

Example: We're slated for hikes in the costs of raw materials.

☐ Very clear

Not the best choice. This could be expressed more clearly: We're expecting the costs of raw materials to rise.

☐ Possibly unclear

Correct choice. This could be expressed more clearly: We're expecting the costs of raw materials to rise.

Example: Who is our point man at GluTech?

- ☐ Very clear

Not the best choice. Avoid sporting terms such as *point man*, *run with the ball*, *stand-off*, *another ball game*, and so on.

- ☐ Possibly unclear

Correct choice. Avoid sporting terms such as *point man*, *run with the ball*, *stand-off*, *another ball game*, and so on.

Example: Let's meet with the client at 3PM on Thursday.

- ☐ Very clear

Not the best choice. In this example, the time zone is not specified.

- ☐ Possibly unclear

Correct choice. In this example, the time zone is not specified.

Example: May I please see your reports by Monday, 9AM EST?

- ☐ Very clear

Correct choice. This example is concise, polite, and the time zone is specified.

- ☐ Possibly unclear

Not the best choice. This example is concise, polite, and the time zone is specified.

Example: He rejected our proposal because of the cost.

- ☐ Very clear

Correct choice. There are no ambiguous terms in this example.

- ☐ Possibly unclear

Not the best choice. There are no ambiguous terms in this example.

Example: You were right on the money! Please take a stab at interpreting the rest of the data.

- ☐ Very clear

Not the best choice. Idioms such as "right on the money" and "take a stab" might not convey the intended meaning to non-native speakers.

- ☐ Possibly unclear

Correct choice. Idioms such as "right on the money" and "take a stab" might not convey the intended meaning to non-native speakers.

Example: I am very pleased with your work on the specifications!

☐ Very clear

Correct choice. This positive feedback would be hard to misinterpret.

☐ Possibly unclear

Not the best choice. This positive feedback would be hard to misinterpret.

Example: I realize this is a touchy issue, since the major players are high profile.

☐ Very clear

Not the best choice. *Touchy* would be better rendered as delicate or difficult; *major* should be avoided in most contexts; instead of *players*, say participants, contributors, or involved parties; and *high profile* is an overused descriptor.

☐ Possibly unclear

Correct choice. *Touchy* would be better rendered as delicate or difficult; *major* should be avoided in most contexts; instead of *players*, say participants, contributors, or involved parties; and *high profile* is an overused descriptor.

Key Idea: Web sites and intranet sites

Key Idea

The Web has changed the way virtual teams can work. A project Web site can substitute for the "team room"—the physical space where members of same-place teams gather to discuss ideas, socialize, and get updates on the project. Using browsers they already have, virtual team members go to a project Web site to review posted deliverables, check schedules, and get information. Intranet sites—that is, private corporate networks that use standard Internet protocols—can work in much the same way.

A virtual team room can be set up in the project Web site using four "walls," like those in a real team room:

- **Purpose wall:** This wall includes the team charter, goals, tasks, a list of deliverables, and current results.

- **People wall:** This section identifies the team members and states their roles. Here, users can find out who is involved with different aspects of the project. If possible, attach a photo of each team member and a brief description of his or her particular work and expertise. Putting a face and a bit of history with a name adds an important dimension to virtual teamwork.
- **Document wall:** This part of the site contains a schedule of upcoming meetings and their agendas. Minutes of past meetings and any meeting presentations are also stored on this wall. Members can use this wall to post their work for review by colleagues. Those reviews and comments can likewise be posted.
- **Communications wall:** This section contains links and information that connect everyone on the team.

For example, it might offer a link to research reports or other studies that the team needs to do its work. It might also contain a list of rules for e-mailing, phone calling, and other routine team communications.

Web sites are valuable assets, but they require tending. Someone must monitor and update the site, as well as fix any technical problems that arise. Depending on the scope of the project, this could be a full-time job for a team member. Make sure that you consider the technical needs associated with a project Web site before the project gets underway.

By acting as a virtual "team room," a project website can help foster group identity and facilitate communication among the members of a virtual team.

Leadership Insight: Central intelligence

There are really two benefits, as I see it, for virtual teams: diversity of the team, as well as flexibility. We like the flexibility, because it allows us to go across the organization and even utilize suppliers, both to manage our resources as well as to pick the best people for a particular project. So we aren't dependent on one particular site to provide all of the resources. The second thing is diversity. We find that different sites are bringing different backgrounds, different understandings of the customer needs. If we can integrate our suppliers into our teams as well, we come away with much better solutions for our customers.

One case in particular that we used a virtual team has been really quite effective. We had a particular project, unfortunately it was running behind schedule; we were using about four different Boeing sites as well as a major supplier.

When I came on board, I really understood that the team didn't have a strong team identity. I found that that's the first thing you need to accomplish — and you don't think about it — for a regular team, when everyone is sitting together and going to the same meetings and even have a chance to go to lunch or after work out together.

There were a couple of things that we implemented. First off, to create a team branding or team identity, we went with a single Web site. I know that sounds very simple, but we didn't have one. That Web site served a couple of purposes.

First, it had a single community bulletin board, if you will, of what was happening on the projects. We could let the entire team know what meetings were upcoming. It didn't mean that all of the team was invited to every meeting, but at least let the team know, in terms of what was happening. Secondly, we could also tell the team of what decisions were being made on the project.

Lastly, we used this electronic means to set forth a single configuration-controlled database for the project. Again, most of our projects at Boeing are very engineering-heavy, have a lot of precise calculations that are required; and when we have people scattered, you sometimes lose configuration control, as we say in the business, of fairly complex projects.

By having a single database – that really helped to bring the team together and put a single owner, if you will, of the database at one of our smaller sites. That really brought that site manager, who felt a little bit neglected in the past, onboard. You really need to have a single person who's making sure the data on that Web site is accurate and is consistent. Having bad information out there is sometimes worse than having no information at all.

Use a common Web site to create a strong team identity.

Dan Groneck **Director, Technology Planning and Execution, Boeing**

Dan Groneck is Director of Technology Planning and Execution in Boeing Research & Technology (BR&T), where he is responsible for developing and managing the technology strategy. BR&T is the Boeing Company's central research and development organization, with over 3700 engineers.

Dan first joined the organization in 1997, and in 2005 he was named Executive Program Integrator to Bob Krieger, President of Boeing Phantom Works. In this position Dan led special projects, monitored day-to-day operations of the organization, and coordinated executive-level events. In 2007 Dan became Chief Engineer for over 550 engineers in the AeroStructures, Manufacturing & Support Technology organization within BR&T. He was promoted to his current position in 2010.

Dan holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and history from Rice University, as well as a Master of Science in mechanical engineering and a Master of Business Administration from Washington University. He attended Harvard Business School's General Management Program. Dan has taught Operations and Project Management at Maryville University and several courses at the Boeing Leadership Center.

Database access

Databases contain documents and other information that's useful to the team. They are accessible from Web sites and intranet sites. Documents (often called records) in databases often contain sensitive material. Some virtual team members may be allowed to change such documents, but your organization may want to restrict that capability. For example, team members who are not employed

by your company (for example, customers or vendors) may have access to view restricted documents but may not be able to edit them.

Group-editing software

Teams are forever generating and submitting reports. Since several members must collaborate in report development, they need a handy way of incorporating changes into electronic files. Chances are, the word processors used in your organization have a feature that allows users to track the changes made to a document. But some members of your team may not be aware of this feature. Others may be aware of the feature but have little or no experience in using it.

Many tech-savvy organizations use collaborative editing tools. These software applications allow multiple people to edit a single file using different computers. There are two types of collaborative editors:

- **Web-based, real-time collaborative editors (RTCE)**, which allow editors to make changes in the same file at the same time.
- **Non-real-time collaborative editors** are asynchronous, meaning that editors cannot edit the same file at the same time. This software is similar to revision or version- control systems.

Check with your IT department to see what is available at your organization.

When e-mail won't do



There are times when e-mails won't do—when team members simply must get together to talk about their work. In other words, they need a “live” meeting. For the most part, phone conferencing serves the live meeting function for the virtual team.

For example, a team member wants to speak directly with a customer about how he has adapted the team's product to make it more effective.

In other cases, people may need to see each other. This is especially important when new people have just joined the team and others need to get to know them. Or perhaps team members need to see the physical objects that others are working on: a product prototype or different color choices for a new package design. Although face-to-face contact is not always possible, it's beneficial when it does happen.

To bring virtual teams together for “live” meetings, consider the following technology:

- Telephone conferencing

- Videoconferencing
- Web conferencing

Telephone conferencing

The telephone conference is the quickest and easiest way for the virtual team to communicate verbally. A telephone conference is often necessary to review key deliverables, discuss strategy, and brainstorm. Many kinds of phone-conference technologies exist, from built-in conferencing in telephone systems to conferences hosted by communication service providers—and nearly every company has these available.

Leadership Insight: When technology fails you

Technology is great. It's really changed the way business works in this era. But technology is not foolproof. In fact, technology breakdowns are much more common than you anticipate and it really can affect work and interaction among people.

I'll give you an example of this. There was this huge reorganization announcement that a leader of an organization was trying to make. It was going to be a meeting in which many people would call in. This announcement was highly anticipated.

He begins to share this restructuring news that has impact on many around the room and outside who had called in for this announcement. And in the middle of it, suddenly there's this "beep" sound, and everyone kind of looked down to the conference machines, and they had stopped working.

All the callers were cut out of this conversation, and no one really knew how long it had been. Of course, you have this very intense conversation that is going on and all these people who have called in are suddenly shut out.

I can tell you countless stories of videoconferencing failing, conference calls dropping, disconnecting people. E-mails sent out and lost in cyberspace and others feeling, "Wow, I've been left out of this communiqué," when in fact it's a technical failure.

So technology is not always a panacea. It does come with a ton of errors and mistakes. And the lesson for those of us who use technology is that you're not relying completely on technology and using multiple technologies to make sure that your communication is coming across.

Or sometimes what I call "redundant" communication is an important way of interacting with others, kind of replicating some of your communiqué. If you're sending an e mail, leave a voice mail as well if it's an important message that you're trying to convey.

High-technology is not foolproof. When communicating globally, make sure that you have a back-up system.

Tsedal Neeley
Assistant Professor, Organizational Development, Harvard Business School

Tsedal Neeley is an assistant professor in Organizational Behavior at Harvard Business School. Her research focuses on the challenges that international collaborators face when attempting to coordinate work across national and linguistic boundaries, with special emphasis in the impact of language on social dynamics.

Tsedal was a Stanford University School of Engineering Lieberman award recipient for excellence in teaching and research. Before her academic career, Professor Neeley worked for Lucent Technologies and The Forum Corporation.

With extensive international experience, she is fluent in four languages. Tsedal received her Ph.D. from Stanford University's Department of Management Science and Engineering, specializing in Organizational Studies.

Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is another channel that encourages team connectivity. It can bring teams together without spending time or money on meals, travel, and lodging. Team members located in London, for example, can see and interact with their colleagues in Rome without leaving their offices. However, videoconferencing can be complicated and typically requires the help of people with technical skills. For basic video, each participant needs the appropriate computer, camera, microphone, software, and Internet connection. Unfortunately, systems from different vendors aren't always compatible with different computers. So if your team opts for video, be sure everyone gets a compatible system.

Web conferencing

Web conferencing has become the norm for virtual team meetings that require sharing visual information, whether graphics, charts, slide-based presentations, or animations. By logging into the same Web site, using shared screen technology, everyone on the team can look at the same information in the same way, at the same time.

In a Web conference, participants can share documents housed on their local computers and pass control from team member to team member.

For example, if a team leader in Houston, Texas, wants to share a presentation, the meetings controls shifts to him. Once he is finished, if someone in London wants to draw a diagram using the electronic whiteboard function available in some software, control passes to her, and the rest of the team will be able to see the image take shape on their computer screens. This makes it possible for team members to discuss the sketch and recommend changes—all in real time.

Other Web conferencing features useful for a virtual team include:

- **Meeting recording:** Records presentation activity for review after the meeting is over or for distribution to absent team members.
- **Text chat:** Enables questions to be answered in real time without interrupting the presenter. Chat functionality may be public (viewable by the entire team) or private (between two meeting participants).

- **VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol):** Allows real-time audio communication through the computer via headphones or speakers, eliminating the need for a telephone.

Overview

This section provides interactive exercises so you can practice what you've learned. These exercises are self-checks only; your answers will not be used to evaluate your performance in the topic.

Scenario

Assume the role of a manager in a fictional situation and explore different outcomes based on your choices (5-10 minutes).

Check Your Knowledge

Assess your understanding of key points by completing a 10-question quiz (10 minutes).

Scenario: Part 1

Part 1

Scott is a project manager for London-based Timmins Engineering, a specialized engineering development company with a niche market in measurement devices and with clients around the world. Whenever the company wins a new contract, it forms a virtual team to carry out the work. A team typically consists of the following people: professionals from Timmins, most of whom telecommute; independent consultants and technical specialists from many countries; and project managers from the client company.

Recently, OMD, a Shanghai-based firm, hired Timmins Engineering to help them develop a highly complex measurement device—on a tight schedule and limited budget. To produce the device on time, Scott's team will need to work like a well-oiled machine. Scott assembles the team and then begins setting expectations about how the group will work together.

What expectations should Scott set?

- To accommodate the tight deadline and different time zones, people may need to be available for phone conferencing during occasional evenings and weekends.

Not the best choice.

At this early stage, Scott should do a "culture check" before laying out such expectations. People from different cultures have varying assumptions about working conditions, hours, and communication patterns. For example, in some cultures, workers

are never expected to be available during weekends or holidays, or to put in overtime.

Before clarifying expectations about hours, Scott should carefully consider any cultural differences. He should then discuss them with all team members to define expectations that are acceptable to everyone.

- To build a sense of community, team members should feel encouraged to chat informally and socially by phone or e-mail when the opportunity arises.

Not the best choice.

Because the project team is multicultural, Scott should take into account different attitudes about working relationships before laying out this expectation. For example, in some countries, professionals may consider social chatter or informal conversations about family and personal life inappropriate in a working relationship.

Scott should familiarize himself with the various cultural attitudes of his team members. Then he should help the group establish community-building procedures that are acceptable and comfortable for everyone.

- To leverage each team member's unique expertise, leadership of the project will need to shift depending on the nature and challenges of the task at hand.

Correct choice.

Many virtual teams include people with specialized expertise who work in different geographic space. No single member has all the answers. Scott and each team member should be willing to share leadership or hand off leadership responsibility to one another depending on the task at hand and the stage of the project.

For example, during the early project-planning stages, perhaps OMD's project manager in Shanghai should take primary responsibility for leading virtual meetings and defining goals. Later, during the design stage, leadership could shift to Timmins Engineering's design specialist at their London headquarters.

Scenario: Part 2

Part 2

The team defines mutually acceptable guidelines regarding leadership of the different project tasks, as well as hours of operation. They agree to hold weekly all-team conference calls to

ensure appropriate levels of communication.

Several weeks into the project, a problem arises: Claudia, a newly self-employed design engineer living in San Francisco, misses several crucial deadlines. Subsequent phases of the project all depend on the designs that Claudia is responsible for creating.

This is the first time Timmins Engineering has worked with Claudia, and Scott is unsure why she's missing deadlines. He knows he needs to do something about the problem. Wei, the OMD project manager in Shanghai, sends Scott a few e-mails and appears slightly concerned. Scott worries that Wei may be more upset than he's letting on in his communications.

What should Scott do about Claudia's missed deadlines?

- Phone Claudia as soon as possible to ask why she's falling behind the agreed-upon deadlines, then ask what he can do to help her get back on track

Correct choice.

Managing a team you can't see poses some unique challenges. One-on-one coaching can help when problems arise. If this is Claudia's first experience working on a virtual team, there may be several reasons for the missed deadlines. For example, as a newly self-employed person trying to build her freelance business, she might have taken on too many projects for several clients at once, and is falling behind.

Scott's job is to quickly figure out what's causing the problem and do whatever he can to help get Claudia back on track. For instance, perhaps he can help her break large tasks into smaller ones, adjust the workload with other team members, or set new interim deadlines a little earlier than the project plan calls for.

- Address the deadline problem during the next weekly team conference call, and invite all team members to offer support and solutions

Not the best choice.

Though it may be helpful to eventually discuss scheduling problems in a team conference call and get different members' ideas for solutions, Scott should first try one-on-one coaching with Claudia. Specifically, he needs to find out what's causing the problem and what he can do to help.

For instance, as a newly self-employed professional working from home, perhaps Claudia feels isolated and is having trouble staying inspired by the project. Scott might offer her some tried-and-true suggestions for easing the isolation, such as getting out of the house at least once a day, occasionally meeting colleagues for lunch, and attending professional association events.

- Promptly schedule a face-to-face team meeting to revisit the project plan as a group and strengthen teamwide commitment to the schedule

Not the best choice.

Though face-to-face team meetings are valuable, they're not very practical with a virtual team consisting of members from around the world. Because of the travel involved, face-to-face meetings are expensive and time-consuming, and could pose problems in light of this project's tight deadlines and budget. Scott should first try one-on-one coaching with Claudia to discover why she has been missing deadlines and what he can do to help. If coaching doesn't solve the problem, he may eventually want to invest in a face-to-face meeting for some or all team members to get the project back on track.

Scenario: Part 3

Part 3

By coaching Claudia, Scott discovers that she's falling behind because she has mistakenly assumed that her early designs must be perfect before she submits them. He realizes that Claudia hasn't been communicating frequently enough with other team members, so she has misunderstood their expectations of her work.

Scott explains that, at this early stage in the project, it's important that Claudia create a quick, rough approximation of a design that other team members can then work with, which Claudia agrees to do.

But this episode has left Scott worried. To prevent further misunderstandings, he decides to take steps to improve communication among team members.

What should Scott do to improve team communication?

- Create a project Web site that provides up-to-date information on the status of each of the project's parts and serves as a virtual team room

Not the best choice.

Though a project Web site offers numerous benefits, it would require a team member who was able and available to set up and maintain the site—something that the team doesn't have. Scott should instead explore "lower-tech," simpler communication-improvement strategies first, such as the development of e-mail

protocols, clarifying when and how often to send e-mails, or the creation of agendas for regularly scheduled conference calls.

For teams that do have the time and resources for a project Web site, the following features can be helpful: (1) a *purpose wall* containing the team charter, project goals, tasks, a list of deliverables, and current results, (2) a *people wall* defining the team members and their roles, (3) a *documents wall* posting a schedule of upcoming meetings and their agendas, minutes of past meetings, and any files relevant to the project, and (4) a *communications wall* containing links and information that connect team members.

- [Install a videoconferencing capability to enable team members to work and communicate with each other at the same time](#)

Not the best choice.

Though videoconferencing offers important benefits, it is more expensive and difficult to establish and use than other communication technologies. This could pose problems for a project that has tight deadlines and a limited budget. Scott should first explore other strategies for improving communication, such as determining how often team members should update each other by e-mail, and whom they should copy on e-mail messages and responses.

For projects in which videoconferencing *is* appropriate, companies can choose from a number of different systems and vendors. For basic videoconferencing, each participant will need an appropriate computer, camera, microphone, software, and Internet connection.

- [Develop e-mail protocols, such as how often team members should communicate and whom they should copy when sending messages and responses](#)

Correct choice.

E-mail is essential for any virtual team, so Scott should begin his communication-improvement efforts here. He needs to establish guidelines for how often team members should communicate by e-mail, whom they should copy on messages and responses, and what kinds of information are acceptable to include in an e-mail message. (For instance, since e-mail is very public, people should never share confidential information through this communication medium.)

Despite the benefits of e-mail, Scott should take care not to encourage his team to *overdo* this form of communication. For example, there's probably no need for each team member to copy every other person in the group with each correspondence. Doing so would only swamp team members with messages that are irrelevant to them. The key is to use e-mail to keep everyone

informed about decisions that affect them, and to ensure that people who need to be involved in certain decisions are consulted.

Scenario: Conclusion

Conclusion

Scott quickly establishes e-mail communication protocols for the OMD project. Following them, team members begin to communicate in a more structured way and to update each other more effectively about their work. The project proceeds more smoothly, and Timmins Engineering ultimately provides OMD with the device on time and within budget.

Virtual teams present unique benefits, such as enabling companies to work with customers and suppliers across vast distances. But such teams pose special challenges as well, such as differing expectations about how the group will work together and differing personal priorities.

To get the most out of your virtual team, set expectations that take cultural differences into account, use one-on-one coaching to address performance problems, and establish effective communication protocols.

Activity: Check Your Knowledge: Question 1

Virtual teams have become common in business today. Which of the following statements best describes a virtual team?

- A virtual team makes it easier for a company to bring together a group of people who have similar skills, experiences, and knowledge about customers and business.

Not the best choice.

This does not accurately describe a virtual team, because team members actually have a *diverse* set of skills, experiences, and knowledge.

The more accurate statement would be that a virtual team typically consists of some members who are linked through communication that is not face-to-face. For example, the team may be linked through e-mail, voice mail, telephone conferencing, videoconferencing, and Internet-based forums. Some teams are entirely virtual; their members rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Other teams are partially virtual; they include some members who work together in an office as well as other company employees in global locations, or representatives of a key supplier in a different country, or perhaps important customers from all over the world.

- A virtual team typically consists of some members who are linked through communication that is not face-to-face.

Correct choice.

The term *virtual team* refers to a team that, for the most part, is linked through communication that is not face-to-face. For example, the team may be linked through e-mail, voice mail, telephone conferencing, videoconferencing, and Internet-based forums. Some teams are entirely virtual; their members rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Other teams are partially virtual; they include some members who work together in an office as well as other company employees in global locations, or representatives of a key supplier in a different country, or perhaps important customers from all over the world.

- A virtual team enables a company to establish a standardized workday based on the operating hours of the company that has created the team.

Not the best choice.

This is not the best statement about a virtual team, because such team members actually work a wide range of hours.

The more accurate statement would be that a virtual team typically consists of some members who are linked through communication that is not face-to-face. For example, the team may be linked through e-mail, voice mail, telephone conferencing, videoconferencing, and Internet-based forums. Some teams are entirely virtual; their members rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face. Other teams are partially virtual; they include some members who work together in an office as well as other company employees in global locations, or representatives of a key supplier in a different country, or perhaps important customers from all over the world.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 2

On virtual teams, the chances of things going awry are much greater than on same-place teams. How can you, as the leader of a virtual team, best build a strong foundation for success?

- Select members for your team who have strong, natural interests in the team's goals, as well as the skills required to do the job

Correct choice.

Selecting people who have interests in the team's goals is a good way to build commitment to the team and its objectives. Commitment is crucial for ensuring that team members allocate their energy and time to the team, not to other demands that may seem more pressing because they have a more immediate, physical presence.

- Retain a firm grip on leadership of your team to ensure that projects proceed as planned and everyone remains focused on the goal

Not the best choice.

This practice will not help you build a strong foundation for success because leadership must be shared in a virtual team.

A better way to build a strong foundation for success is to select members for your team who have a strong, natural interest in the team's goals, as well as the skills required to do the job. Selecting people who have interests in the team's goals is a good way to build commitment to the team and its objectives. Commitment is crucial for ensuring that team members allocate

their energy and time to the team, not to other demands that may seem more pressing because they have a more immediate, physical presence.

- Set hours of operation based on the geographical area in which most of the team members are working, so that few members will have to work during evenings

Not the best choice.

This practice will not help you build a strong foundation for success because a virtual team's hours of operation must accommodate all members' availability.

A better way to build a strong foundation for success is to select members for your team who have a strong, natural interest in the team's goals, as well as the skills required to do the job. Selecting people who have interests in the team's goals is a good way to build commitment to the team and its objectives. Commitment is crucial for ensuring that team members allocate their energy and time to the team, not to other demands that may seem more pressing because they have a more immediate, physical presence.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 3

You're leading a virtual team and want to do your best to foster team identity. Which of the following practices would you apply?

- Avoid arranging face-to-face meetings at important project junctures unless the entire team can come together

Not the best choice.

To foster team identity, it's important to arrange as many face-to-face meetings as possible (even if only subgroups can attend).

The better choice would be to establish subgroups at a launch meeting and charge them with discussing specific facets of the team's project. Subgroups can help build small-group cohesion, which encourages collaboration and helps people to get to know one another on a professional and personal level. By rotating through subgroups, everyone has a chance to meet and work with everyone else on the team.

- Encourage team members to contact you whenever they have concerns about the project; you'll send the message that support is always available

Not the best choice.

To foster team identity, it's important to establish *consistent, not ad hoc* routines for addressing team concerns.

The better choice would be to establish subgroups at a launch meeting and charge them with discussing specific facets of the team's project. Subgroups can help build small-group cohesion, which encourages collaboration and helps people to get to know one another on a professional and personal level. By rotating through subgroups, everyone has a chance to meet and work with everyone else on the team.

- Establish subgroups at a launch meeting and charge them with discussing specific facets of the team's project

Correct choice.

It's helpful to establish these subgroups at a one- or two-day launch meeting for the team. Subgroups can help build small-group cohesion, which encourages collaboration and helps people to get to know one another on a professional and personal level. By rotating through subgroups, everyone has a chance to meet and work with everyone else on the team.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 4

You know that open lines of communication are essential to building mutual trust in your virtual team. Which of the following steps would you take to establish good communication?

- Hold a meeting after the project has been completed to review what went well and what could be improved upon for future virtual team projects

Not the best choice.

This step wouldn't help you establish good communication because you should review progress *throughout* implementation of the team's project.

The better step for building mutual trust would be to create a team roster before the team begins its work. A team roster lists all team members, their role on the team, the best way to contact them, their location and time zone, and the hours during which they will be available for participating in phone or video conferences and responding to e-mails. When combined with other documents and agreements about team goals and processes, the roster helps communicate expectations about how the team will work together.

- Create a team roster before the team begins its work

Correct choice.

A team roster lists all team members, their role on the team, the best way to contact them, their location and time zone, and the hours during which they will be available for participating in phone or video conferences and responding to e-mails. When combined with other documents and agreements about team goals and processes, the roster communicates expectations about how the team will work together.

- Halfway through the project, review the team's goals and ways of measuring progress

Not the best choice.

This step wouldn't help you establish good communication because you should define goals and ways of measuring progress early, not halfway through the project.

The better step for building mutual trust would be to create a team roster before the team begins its work. A team roster lists all team members, their role on the team, the best way to contact them, their location and time zone, and the hours during which they will be available for participating in phone or video conferences and responding to e-mails. When combined with

other documents and agreements about team goals and processes, the roster helps communicate expectations about how the team will work together.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 5

You know that coaching can help ensure that every member of your team gets the help he or she needs to solve problems and improve performance. Which steps would you take to ensure that coaching is available to your team members?

- **Remind team members to respond as quickly as possible to e-mail and voice mail messages, so problems can be addressed promptly**

Not the best choice.

Advising team members to respond immediately to all messages can cause them to use their time ineffectively, which would not be the goal of coaching.

A better coaching approach would be to encourage team members to help one another identify and solve problems related to accomplishing their assigned tasks. Part of coaching a virtual team is leveraging your team members' broad range of skills and knowledge. Be sure all members are familiar with one another's unique abilities and knowledge—such as preparing budget reports, using a particular software application, or resolving interpersonal conflicts. And encourage members to call on one another for coaching assistance if needed.

- **Encourage team members to help one another identify and solve problems related to accomplishing their assigned tasks**

Correct choice.

Part of coaching a virtual team is leveraging your team members' broad range of skills and knowledge. Be sure all members are familiar with one another's unique abilities and knowledge—such as preparing budget reports, using a particular software application, or resolving interpersonal conflicts. Encourage members to call on one another for coaching assistance if needed.

- **Allow team members to initiate conversations with you about problems they've been having, then suggest ways of helping them**

Not the best choice.

Waiting for team members to discuss problems with you can cause delays in addressing problems, which would not be the goal of coaching.

A better coaching approach would be to encourage team members to help one another identify and solve problems related to accomplishing their assigned tasks. Part of coaching a virtual team is leveraging your team members' broad range of skills and knowledge. Be sure all members are familiar with one another's unique abilities and knowledge—such as preparing budget reports, using a particular software application, or resolving interpersonal conflicts. And encourage members to call on one another for coaching assistance if needed.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 6

You want your virtual team to get the best results from technology. Which of the following approaches would best help you?

- Avoid using existing technology; it probably will not be customized sufficiently for your team's needs.

Not the best choice.

You can actually save money and reduce training time by using existing technology.

A practice that would better help your team get the most from technology would be asking whether the team's project schedule has room for technology acquisition, installation, and training. Acquiring and installing new technology takes time, as does training people in its use. By asking whether your team's project schedule has room for these activities, you can identify shortfalls and find ways to gain time for these activities.

- Select technology only after the team's project is underway, so you can determine compatibility and other issues based on actual experience

Not the best choice.

You actually need to evaluate potential technology before the team begins its work, not after the project is under way.

A practice that would better help your team get the most from technology would be asking whether the team's project schedule has room for technology acquisition, installation, and training. Acquiring and installing new technology takes time, as does training people in its use. By asking whether your team's project schedule has room for these activities, you can identify shortfalls and find ways to gain time for these activities.

- Ask whether the team's project schedule has room for technology acquisition, installation, and training

Correct choice.

Acquiring and installing new technology takes time, as does training people in its use. By asking whether your team's project schedule has room for these activities, you can identify shortfalls and find ways to gain time for these activities.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 7

Your virtual team is up and running, and you want to ensure that people make the best possible use of e-mail technology. What do you do?

- Check for compatibility and file compression issues with each member of your team

Correct choice.

If you plan to rely heavily on e-mailing attached documents, you'll need to ensure that team members can open one another's compressed files as well as open and read attached files created using different software programs. Checking for compatibility and compression issues ahead of time can help you anticipate and address any problems.

- Advise team members to copy all other members on any e-mail communications, to foster information flow and adequate communication

Not the best choice.

Asking members to copy each other on all communications can cause them to overload each other with irrelevant e-mail messages.

The better response to this question is that you would want to check for compatibility and file compression issues with each member of your team. If you plan to rely heavily on e-mailing attached documents, you'll need to ensure that team members can open one another's compressed files as well as open and read attached files created using different software programs. Checking for compatibility and compression issues ahead of time can help you anticipate and address any problems.

- Provide e-mail addresses only for those team members who need them, to avoid e-mailing overload

Not the best choice.

Every member on a virtual team needs an e-mail address.

The better response to this question is that you would want to check for compatibility and file compression issues with each member of your team. If you plan to rely heavily on e-mailing attached documents, you'll need to ensure that team members can open one another's compressed files as well as open and read attached files created using different software programs. Checking for compatibility and compression issues ahead of time can help you anticipate and address any problems.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 8

You're establishing a project Web site for your virtual team. What is the *first* thing you should consider as you set up the site?

- The need to post the team's charter, goals, and tasks

Not the best choice.

Though you may want to post the team's charter, goals, and tasks, this would not be the *first* thing to consider when setting up a project Web site. Instead, you would need to make someone responsible for monitoring and updating the site, as well as fixing any technical problems. Virtual team Web sites are valuable assets, but they require tending. Someone must "own" this responsibility. Depending on the scope of the project, this could be a full-time job for a team member.

- The need to find someone to monitor and update the site, as well as fix any technical problems

Correct choice.

Virtual team Web sites are valuable assets, but they require tending. Someone must "own" this responsibility. Depending on the scope of the project, this could be a full-time job for a team member.

- [The need to create a virtual team room on the project Web site by setting up four "walls" to manage the team's purpose, people, documents, and communications](#)

Not the best choice.

Though you may want to create a virtual team room, this would not be the *first* thing to consider when setting up a project Web site. Instead, you would need to make someone responsible for monitoring and updating the site, as well as fixing any technical problems. Virtual team Web sites are valuable assets, but they require tending. Someone must "own" this responsibility. Depending on the scope of the project, this could be a full-time job for a team member.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 9

The members of your team need to explore new product designs and suggest and see recommended changes implemented in real time. Which live-meeting technology would you select to enable them to accomplish these tasks?

- [Videoconferencing](#)

Not the best choice.

Videoconferencing lets team members see and interact with one another without leaving their offices, but it doesn't allow real-time viewing and changing of documents. In a Web conference, team members can use desktop sharing technology to view a drawing or chart on their laptops as it is being created on one participant's computer. Members can also connect by telephone or VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) to discuss the sketch and recommend changes in real time.

- [Web conferencing](#)

Correct choice.

In a Web conference, team members can use desktop sharing technology to view a drawing or chart on their laptops as it is being created on one participant's computer. Members can also connect by telephone or VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) to discuss the sketch and recommend changes in real time.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 10

You're conducting a "culture check" for your virtual team and want to make sure that the team establishes useful processes for working together. What do you do?

- Encourage team members to share decision making with people from their own region who report to them

Not the best choice.

Assuming that team members in other cultures use the same decision-making approach that you use can result in misunderstandings and tensions.

A better way to establish useful processes for working together is to collectively decide who has the authority to assign work to specific team members. By establishing authority and delegation conditions, you prevent misunderstandings that might occur later as team members begin working together. In a virtual team, members share leadership—thus it's not always the team leader who delegates tasks.

- Explain to team members the amount of travel you expect them to handle in order to achieve the team's goals

Not the best choice.

Assuming that members in other cultures have the same expectations about travel that you have can result in misunderstandings and tensions.

A better way to establish useful processes for working together is to collectively decide who has the authority to assign work to specific team members. By establishing authority and delegation conditions, you prevent misunderstandings that might occur later as team members begin working together. In a virtual team, members share leadership—thus it's not always the team leader who delegates tasks.

- Collectively decide who has the authority to assign work to specific team members

Correct choice.

By establishing authority and delegation conditions, you prevent misunderstandings that might occur later as team members begin working together. In a virtual team, members share leadership—thus it's not always the team leader who delegates tasks.

Check Your Knowledge: Results

Your score:

Steps for assembling a virtual team

1. Define the purpose.

The best predictor of a virtual team's success is the clarity of its purpose and the participatory process by which the group achieves it. Work with team members to define the purpose of your team in clear, compelling language. For example, "Our purpose is to create a Web site that will accommodate e-commerce for all three product lines, make site updating and expansion faster

and less costly, and enhance our customers' experience." Make sure everyone interprets the purpose statement in the same way and agrees on it.

2. Identify needed skills and personal qualities.

Ask yourself what skills, knowledge, and expertise will be essential to the team's success. Look beyond technical abilities to include problem-solving talents, capacity to work effectively with others, and understanding of the company's political and logistical landscape. Consider ability to master new skills as needed and capacity to exchange information, write well, and speak clearly and comfortably on the telephone. In addition, you'll need team members who have the following personal qualities:

- They are highly self-disciplined and motivated. The team member will be responsible for staying on schedule and asking for help when necessary. A virtual team is not ideal for people who need a great deal of supervision.
- They are open-minded to new technology. Members may need to learn new, fairly simple technology that will help everyone on the team connect and communicate with one another.

3. Identify people with the required skills and qualities.

Look within *and* outside your organization to find people who have the required skills you've identified. Consider peers, direct reports, suppliers, customers, and consultants. Contact respected colleagues to ask for their opinions about who might make valuable members of the team.

4. Choose your virtual team.

Consider the following processes for selecting team members:

- Invite them to join your virtual team.
- Ask people to volunteer.
- Ask people who have an interest in the project to nominate individuals who have the right skills.

Steps for communicating with a virtual team

1. Start with a face-to-face project launch meeting.

If possible, bring everyone together for a face-to-face project launch meeting. Virtual teams that begin this way hit the ground running. Even if everyone can't be in the same location, try to get as many people together as possible. Include off-site members by conferencing them in either by phone or video.

2. Establish communication guidelines.

As with any team, a virtual team must create guidelines about when to communicate, what to communicate about, and how to communicate. Decide how the team will "meet" on a regular basis—phone conferences, video conferences, face-to-face gatherings. Obviously, not everyone must be present at every meeting.

3. Agree on standards and protocols for communication.

Determine who will receive what types of communication and when. Who will be copied on what? Determine how frequently people will check e-mail and voice mail, and how promptly they will be expected to respond to such messages.

4. **Work out ways to communicate spontaneously.**

Same-place teams have the opportunity to converse spontaneously—whether it's in the lunchroom, the hallway, or someone's office. Because virtual teams are typically dispersed, they lack this spontaneity. Although it's an oxymoron, "planned spontaneity" can actually work. Regular phone conversations and even an open chat area on a Web site keep people sharing ideas and working together.

5. **Document expectations about processes and results.**

While agreeing on processes and results is important, it's equally critical to document what's been decided. This document may take the form of a written work plan or team charter that's e-mailed to all team members or made available on a team intranet site. The goal is to ensure that the information is accessible to every team member—and that everyone is "on the same page" with what has been decided.

Steps for laying a technology foundation

1. **Assess time, money, and technology resources.**

Schedule time and budget money to lay your technology foundation. Unexpected problems and unforeseen needs can drain budgets and waste time. You don't want members of your team waiting around for software to arrive, for phone lines to be installed, or for someone from IT to become available to assign passwords so they can get into the server. Setting up and running the technology end of the project can be an enormous task, requiring a high level of expertise. Assign or hire someone to assess, acquire, and maintain the technology throughout the project.

2. **Assess your existing resources.**

If your organization already uses project Web sites or videoconferencing, consider using them for the virtual workspace as well. Introduce as little new technology as possible.

3. **Determine each team member's current access to technology.**

What do they have? What will they need? What are they already comfortable using?

4. **Assess technology compatibility.**

In the early phases of the project, determine the file types that team members will exchange. Have team members send one another sample files to ensure that everyone's technology is compatible.

- **Text documents:** If you know you will be sending documents, examine word-processing software, compatibility, and compression programs.
- **Graphics and spreadsheets:** If you know you will be sending graphics or spreadsheets, look at your faxing technology, software, compression programs, and members' access to the Internet. Be sure that files can be transmitted and opened smoothly.
- **Read-only files:** If you're dealing with members who use many kinds of specialized software, consider getting everyone software that allows you to create PDF (Portable Document

Format) or other read-only files. Graphics, spreadsheets, flow charts, and other documents can be transformed to a universal, read-only format for review and distribution. Only the people who work on the files directly need to have the actual software that creates them.

- **Phone, Web, and videoconferencing:** If your team needs to engage in frequent brainstorming sessions, check out phone and videoconferencing options before you need to use them. Test your equipment to see if it's doing the job and to evaluate whether you need more speakerphones, webcams, and/or headsets. Compare services and rates for conference call hosting services offered by phone service providers.

Steps for creating a work plan

1. Get the right software.

The work plan is your touchstone. It directs team and individual efforts and lets members hold one another accountable for getting the work done. Work plans are important anywhere, but in the virtual workspace they are crucial.

Select the right software on which to create and post your work plan. Investigate conferencing and document-management software that includes calendar and scheduling software, and check into other ways to create permanent records of all decisions, discussions, and transactions.

2. Agree on the contents of the plan.

Create the work plan together. Make sure the plan contains all the information each team member will need to do the work. Add elements as needed and use this project's amended work plan as the basis for the next project's work plan. Post your work plan on the project Web site.

3. Assign a team member as "keeper" of the plan.

Select one team member to serve as the first "keeper" of the work plan. But then rotate the job so all members learn how to maintain the plan, and no one person gets shouldered with it. It's essential for everyone to understand how important—and how difficult—it is to keep the plan updated.

4. Monitor the plan.

Keep your work plan accurate, up-to-date, and always accessible to team members. Post it online on the project Web site. Software is available that will allow you to post work plans and team flow for project management.

Encourage the entire team to take responsibility for monitoring the plan and alerting others to needed changes.

5. Update the plan as needed.

Remind team members that any changes made to the work plan will impact other tasks and team members' work.

6. Communicate changes made to the plan.

When the work plan changes, people must be notified. The "keeper" should notify everyone of changes made. E-mail is one way to communicate this kind of information; another is to flag changes on the project Web site.

Steps for maintaining version control of documents

1. Choose software that makes it easy.

Your organization's IT department might be able to offer some suggestions.

2. Determine naming conventions.

Before getting under way, establish naming conventions for files, folders, and dates. File names should be easily understandable. Post the conventions wherever people will be sure to see them: as part of the team's operating agreements, on the intranet, on the team Web site—whatever it takes so team members pay attention to them.

3. Decide who owns what files.

Several people may work on one file, but maintaining the file should be one person's ultimate responsibility.

4. Clarify procedures for archiving files.

When a new version of a file is created, the old file should be archived. Work with team members to develop a good way to archive files. Archives should be easily accessible during the life of the project and stored in the same place on the team Web site.

Tips for writing an e-mail message

- Send a separate e-mail for each topic. That makes it easier for recipients to respond and file or delete the message.
- Use the subject line to make a clear statement or specific request. This will make your message stand out in a recipient's crowded inbox.
- Put the most important content at the beginning; recipients don't always scroll down to the end.
- Make it brief, focused, specific. Deliver the most information in the least space.
- Keep paragraphs short (three or four lines). Attach files if you need to send something longer or you need to use headings, bullets, tables, graphics, and other formats that make your message easier to read and understand.
- When replying, use your software's quoting feature to include a copy of the original text. This is a handy reminder for recipients who might not recall what they wrote previously.
- Never write e-mail when your emotions are raging. Anger and sarcasm often come across more strongly in text than they would in a face-to-face communication. An e-mail is a permanent record that can come back to haunt you.
- Don't use all capital letters because it looks like you're shouting.
- Don't use inappropriate humor.
- Proofread! Always review your message before pressing Send. Think "AAAA" and double check that your message contains: a correct *Address*, correct *Attached* files, suitable *Attitude* and tone, and a statement of the *Action* you want the recipient to take.

Tips for leaving voice mail

- Always identify yourself.

- Leave a concise message (write an outline or even a script before you call, if you find it hard to compose a message on the fly).
- Convey information that is specific and concrete.
- Speak slowly and distinctly when giving phone numbers or other facts the recipient may want to write down.
- Don't ramble. Remember, voice mail it isn't a two-way conversation, and the recipient may have many other messages to pick up.
- *Always* leave your phone number.
- Watch your emotions. One-way communication can come across angrier, more hurtful, or more self-pitying than intended.
- If you need a call-back, state where and when you'll be available. Otherwise you will end up exchanging phone messages back and forth.
- Voice mail can be used as a record. If you receive voice mail that you feel you may need later, save it. When leaving a voice mail, remember, your message is being recorded.

Tips for making conference calls

- Create an agenda for the conference call. Distribute the agenda and any other documents relevant to the meeting before the conference call takes place.
- Make sure that the speakers at every end of the call can be heard. If you experience technical difficulty with your in-house conferencing system, consider using the conference call services of a telephone provider that acts as host.
- If possible, initiate a Web conference in conjunction with the call so everyone is viewing the same information. Having a visual presence also helps to prevent multitasking and keeps team members' attention focused.
- Assign one person as facilitator to keep the agenda moving, another as note taker so that meeting notes are recorded and posted promptly, and a third person to watch the time.
- When you jump into the conversation, preface your statement with "This is ____" (your name).
- Speak clearly—don't shout (especially on a speakerphone)—and avoid slang that may not be familiar to call participants from other regions, cultures, or countries.
- Pose questions to individuals who are not engaged in the discussion in order to draw them into the discussion.
- Limit interruptions and digressions.
- Avoid letting one person dominate the conversation.
- Don't try to do anything else while on the call. If you must attend to something else briefly, use your "mute" button or put the call on hold.
- Avoid status reporting on calls: Use the precious real time to brainstorm, resolve differences, and make decisions. Team members can read the status reports before the meeting.
- Conclude the call as you would any meeting. Summarize what was said, confirm decisions, and reiterate steps for future action.

- Distribute notes on the meeting as soon as possible by posting them to the team Web site. Follow up on action steps immediately.

Tips for establishing a project web site

- Employ a project Web site that is flexible enough to accommodate growth, change, and use on more than one project.
- Ensure that the site is comprehensive enough to grow without becoming cumbersome.
- Guarantee that the site follows a logical, intuitive format for uploading and downloading information.
- Make sure the site lets you customize a unique graphic look and feel that will give your team an identity.
- Confirm that the site is up and running *before* the project starts. Introduce and demonstrate the site at the launch meeting.
- Designate someone to oversee management of the site throughout the project.

Tips for deciding which communication media to use

- How important is your message? Important messages should be easy to save and refer back to. E-mails and documents can become permanent records.
- How complicated is it? If you can say it in a sentence or two, e-mail or voice mail is fine. If it's fairly long and/or complicated, consider attaching a file to an e-mail, sending a fax, or talking to someone on the phone. Ideally, everything should be posted to the team's Web site, which ensures that everyone has access to the same version of the same information.
- What do you need to know? If you need feedback from several people, consider asking for a phone conference. If input does not have to be simultaneous, a discussion between the key participants on the team's Web site may work. E-mail is always a fallback.
- How urgent is it? Some people rarely check e-mail; some are unreachable by phone but listen to voice mail; some read messages on their smartphones or PDAs while moving around during the day and respond at night. Know the habits of your team members and communicate in a way that will work for them.
- What will be the emotional impact? If the recipient is likely to have a strong reaction to the message (good or bad), send it in a more personal format. Remember that the phone remains a great way to communicate.
- If you're responding to a message, you don't always have to respond in the same medium.
- Written media (posting to the team Web site, attachments to e-mail) are best for detailed, complex messages or when you or the recipient will need a permanent record.
- Voice media (phone, voice mail, teleconference) are best for urgent messages, or when collaboration and conversation are important.

Contact information form for virtual team members

<i>Contact Information Form for Virtual Team Members</i>			
<i>Use this form to record each team member's contact information, including how and when he or she prefers to be reached. Remember to reference the time zones of global team members. Include country codes in phone numbers. Post this to your project Web site, or e-mail it as an attachment to all team members.</i>			
TEAM MEMBER			
Role		Address	
E-mail			
Work phone		Time zone	
Mobile phone		Best time to call	
Fax		Preferred form of correspondence	
TEAM MEMBER			
Role		Address	
E-mail			
Work phone		Time zone	
Mobile phone		Best time to call	
Fax		Preferred form of correspondence	
TEAM MEMBER			
Role		Address	
E-mail			
Work phone		Time zone	
Mobile phone		Best time to call	
Fax		Preferred form of correspondence	
TEAM MEMBER			
Role		Address	
E-mail			
Work phone		Time zone	
Mobile phone		Best time to call	
Fax		Preferred form of correspondence	

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Worksheet for setting up a virtual team

<i>Worksheet for Setting Up a Virtual Team</i>
<i>Use this worksheet to establish a strong foundation for a virtual team.</i>
What is the vision for the team?
What are the team's goals?
What roles will each team member play?
What will be each team member's responsibilities?
What kinds of decisions will the team have the authority to make?
Who will make what types of decisions?
What, precisely, is the team expected to deliver?
When is the team's work expected to be finished?
How will the team's success be measured?
What are the major milestones the team will reach while progressing toward its goal?
What are the major risks associated with the team's goals, and how will those risks be addressed?
How will commitment to the team be sustained throughout the project?
How will leadership be shared among team members?

<i>Culture Check Worksheet</i>
<i>Use this worksheet to perform a "culture check" to address the unique challenges that arise in virtual teams.</i>
Working Conditions
How much will team members be expected to travel?
What resources will be available to them for getting their work done?
Hours of Operation
How many hours per day or week are team members expected to work?
How early or late are team members expected to be available for phone or videoconferences?
Authority and Delegation
Who will be responsible for making what types of decisions as the team does its work?
Who has the authority to assign work to specific team members?
Communication Patterns
What are team members' assumptions about appropriate and acceptable communication—in particular, what is considered polite or impolite communication?

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Virtual team work plan

<i>Virtual Team Work Plan</i>				
<i>Use this form to detail the tasks that team members need to accomplish according to schedule. This can be posted to a project Web site, or circulated as an e-mail attachment. It is designed to be updated frequently.</i>				
Keeper of plan:		Date of plan update:		
Goal #1:				
Tasks	Member(s) Responsible	Target Date	Results/Task Completion Date	Reviewed/ Approval Date
Goal #2:				
Tasks	Member(s) Responsible	Target Date	Results/Task Completion Date	Reviewed/ Approval Date

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Why Develop Others?

“At the end of the day, you bet on people, not strategies.”

Larry Bossidy

Former CEO, AlliedSignal

In today’s global business environment, markets and regulations change quickly. Competitors constantly innovate. Technological changes are the norm.

In order to outmaneuver the competition and meet the demands of the moment, organizations must be agile. They must execute flawlessly. And they must transform themselves continuously.

Are your leaders ready?

Dr. Noel M. Tichy

Professor

University of Michigan Ross School of Business

We have now entered an era where I don’t care what industry you’re in, you need leaders who

can make decisions, make judgment calls at every single level. All the way down to the interface with the customer.

If you go to a company like Google or any of the high tech companies, a lot of the innovation that Amazon does is happening right at the front line. Go ahead, try it, put it out there, we'll learn from it. That cannot happen if the senior leadership doesn't have a commitment to both develop the leadership capability, but develop the business through engaging people at all levels of the organization.

Becoming a teaching organization

I like to tell parents that they cannot delegate their responsibility to develop their children. And I think it is the same in an organization. Day in and day out the person that has the biggest impact on people in the organization is the next level above and the associates around and below. And so to build a learning organization I say is not enough. Learning could be, you know we are learning cooking, we are learning this or that, but teaching organizations, when I learned something, I have a responsibility to teach my colleagues.

So everybody takes responsibility for generating new knowledge and it is not enough to be a learner, you then have to translate it into teaching.

The Virtuous Teaching Cycle

The role of a leader is to ensure that the people who work for them and around them are better every day. There's only one way to make people better. It's to teach them, learn from them, create what I call "virtuous teaching cycles", not command and control.

A virtuous teaching cycle is teach learn, teach learn. And the leader has a responsibility for reducing the hierarchy, for having a point of view to start the discussion, but then to be responsible to hear everyone's voice, get everyone involved in a disciplined way. It is not a free for all. But it is the leader's responsibility to create that virtuous teaching cycle.

A wonderful example of virtuous teaching cycle is the program that Roger Enrico ran at Pepsi, where every one of the 10 vice presidents comes with a business project.

Roger Enrico gets smarter as result of five days with 10 vice presidents, because he's learning from them. He needs to lower the hierarchy. He needs to be open to learning. And in turn, the people participating need to be energized and empowered to come up and engage in problem solving.

Another example is at Best Buy, where every morning in the stores you would bring 20 associates or so together and they would review the profit and loss statement from the day before, what we learned from the different customer segments in our stores, what we can do to improve our performance this day. And they do that every single day. The store manager was learning mostly from the associates on the floor.

That was a virtuous teaching cycle where everybody is teaching everybody, everybody is learning and the result has been an incredible result at Best Buy.

"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

- Harvey S. Firestone

Founder, Firestone Tire and Rubber Co

There are clear advantages to leader-led development.

But for many leaders, taking on teaching, coaching, and other development responsibilities can seem daunting. You might avoid taking on these roles due to lack of time, resources, or your own lack of comfort with this role.

The following tips and resources can help you impart valuable learning to your team every day.

To develop others...

- Start with a Teachable Point of View

The first requirement of being able to develop other leaders is to have what I call a teachable point of view. I often give the example of, if I ran a tennis camp and you just came to day one of the tennis camp, I better have a teachable point of view on how I teach tennis. So you are standing there looking at me and it has got four elements. One, the ideas, well how do I teach the backhand, the forehand, the serve, rules of tennis. Then if I am a good tennis coach, I have a set of values. What are the right behaviors I want, how do I want you to dress, how do I want you to behave on the tennis court.

But if that's all I have, what do I do? Show you a power point presentation and then expect you to hit 500 backhands, 500 serves, run around for eight hours. I have to have a teachable point of view on emotional energy. How do I motivate you to buy in to the ideas and values?

On one end of the spectrum it could be I threaten you with corporal punishment, the other I can give you stock options, I can make you feel good about yourself, I can help you develop as a human being, what motivates you.

And then finally, how do I make the tough judgment calls, the yes/no, decisions as the tennis coach, the ball is in, the ball is out. I don't hire consultants and set up a committee, it is yes/no. And the same with running a business, what are the products, services, distribution channels, customer segments that are going to grow top line growth and profitability of the organization.

What are the values that I want everyone in the organization to have, how do I emotionally energize thousands of people, and then how do I make the yes/no, judgments on people and on business issues. So the fundamental building block of being able to develop other leaders is to have that teachable point of view just like the tennis coach.

To develop others...

- Lead with questions

Questions are hugely important because you want to create dialogue and again, what I call a virtuous teaching cycle where the teacher learns from the students and vice versa. Which means everybody ought to be free to ask whatever is on their mind, whatever it will take to get clarity and understanding, but it is not the leader just coming in and freeform asking questions. I believe the leader has a responsibility for framing the discussion, for having as best they can a teachable point of view, they may need help from their people in flushing it out, but they need to set the stage but then it has to be a very interactive, what I call virtuous teaching cycle environment, teach learn, teach learn, teach learn.

To develop others...

- Make it part of your routine

A good example to me of an outstanding leader developing other leaders is Myrtle Potter who at the time I am commenting was Chief Operating Officer of Genentech running the commercial side of the business. And she would take time at the end of every single meeting and do some coaching of the whole team on how we could perform as a team better, and then she would

often take individuals and say, could we spend 10 minutes over a cup of coffee, I want to give you some feedback and coaching on that report that you just presented on or how you are handling a particularly difficult human resource issue, but it was part of her regular routine. And I think the challenge for all of us as leaders is to make that a way of life and it is built into the fabric of how we lead and it is not a one off event, three times a year. It is happening almost every day.

To develop others...

- Make it a priority

One of the biggest challenges in getting people kind of on this path is to overcome some of their own resistance, either fear or the way I view the world I don't have time for this, everybody can make time. Roger Enrico is CEO of Pepsi. He didn't have time to go off for a week at a time and run training sessions. He had to readjust his calendar. So it requires you to look in the mirror and say, is this important. If it is important, of course I can make the time. Then I have to get over my own anxiety on how well I can do it, but it is a commitment to get on the path that says: this is how I am going to drive my own performance and the performance of my colleagues.

To develop others...

- Learn to teach

I think the biggest mistake is to assume you are going to be good at it right off the bat. It is like learning anything else. First time you go out and try and play tennis, good luck. But you got to stay with it and you got to engage your people in helping make you better and them better. And so it is a journey you need to get on, not I am going to do it perfectly when I start out.

If you want to be a great leader who is a great teacher, it's very simple. You have got to dive into the deep end of the pool. But you've got to dive into the pool with preparation. I don't want you drowning. I want you succeeding. It is extraordinarily rewarding for most human beings to teach others. I think once you can turn that switch on, it is self perpetuating. You get a lot of reinforcement, your team is better. You perform better because your performance goes up and it becomes this virtuous teaching cycle.

Your opportunity to develop others

We've heard why developing others can drive greater business results, and how to make the most of your leader-led development efforts. The materials provided in Develop Others enable you to create personalized learning experiences for YOUR team within the flow of their daily activities. Use the guides and projects to engage your team quickly. And to explore how key concepts apply to them in the context of their priorities and goals.

The value of teaching is the performance of the organization is totally dependent on making your people smarter and more aligned every day as the world changes. In the 21st century we are not going to get by with command and control. We are going to have to get by with knowledge creation. The way you create knowledge in an organization is you create these virtuous teaching cycles where you are teaching and learning simultaneously, responding to customer demands and changes, responding to changes in the global environment. My bottom line is if you're not teaching, you're not leading.

A leader's most important role in any organization is making good judgments — well informed, wise decisions about people, strategy and crises that produce the desired outcomes. When a leader shows consistently good judgment, little else matters. When he or she shows poor judgment nothing else matters. In addition to making their own good judgment calls, good leaders develop good judgment among their team members.

Dr. Noel M. Tichy

Professor, University of Michigan Ross School of Business

Dr. Noel M. Tichy is Professor of Management and Organizations, and Director of the Global Business Partnership at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. The Global Business Partnership links companies and students around the world to develop and engage business leaders to incorporate global citizenship activities, both environmental projects and human capital development, for those at the bottom of the pyramid. Previously, Noel was head of General Electric's Leadership Center at Crotonville, where he led the transformation to action learning at GE. Between 1985 and 1987, he was Manager of Management Education for GE where he directed its worldwide development efforts at Crotonville. He currently consults widely in both the private and public sectors. He is a senior partner in Action Learning Associates. Noel is author of numerous books and articles, including:

For more information about Noel Tichy, visit <http://www.noeltichy.com>.

Share an Idea

Leaders are in a unique position to recognize the ideas and tools that are most relevant and useful for their teams. If you only have a few minutes, consider sharing an idea or tool from this topic with your team or peers that is relevant and timely to their situation.

For example, consider sending one of the three recommended ideas or tools below to your team with your comments or questions on how the idea or tool can be of value to your organization. By simply sharing the item, you can easily engage others in important conversations and activities relevant to your goals and priorities.

[Steps for assembling a virtual team](#)

[Tips for deciding which communication media to use](#)

[Perform a "culture check"](#)

To share an idea, tip, step, or tool with your comments via e-mail, select the EMAIL link in the upper right corner of the page that contains the idea, tip, step, or tool that you wish to share.

Discussion 1: How your virtual team will work together

You're about to lead a virtual team. As you know, when leading any team, you need to determine how the team will work together — including working conditions and hours of operation, authority protocols, and communication standards.

But when it comes to making such decisions, leading a virtual team raises unique challenges. For example, members of a virtual team often reside in distant time zones, so you need to select meeting times that are manageable for everyone. And team members based in different countries may have different ideas about what constitutes appropriate communication.

If you don't clarify such matters before your virtual team begins its work, misunderstandings and

frustrations can arise.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your virtual team about how you will all work together. Members of your team may participate in the discussion in person, by phone or video- or Web-conferencing, depending on your situation.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: How Your Virtual Team Will Work Together](#)

[Discussion Guide: How Your Virtual Team Will Work Together](#)

[Discussion Slides: How Your Virtual Team Will Work Together \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

Working through the discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

Discussion 2: Communication in your virtual team

When your employees lead a virtual team, they may encounter unique communication challenges. For example, unlike members of a traditional team, people working in a virtual team don't have access to coffee-room conversations or other opportunities to detect — and respond to — signs of potential distress expressed through one another's body language and gestures.

As a result, misunderstandings and tensions can arise. Such communication lapses may include lack of clarity about: who's doing what to move the project forward, how people should update one another on the work, or what was decided during a video- or phone conference.

To avoid these potential communication mishaps, your people must create open lines of communication to ensure that members of their virtual team can easily and accurately communicate with one another. Effective communication fosters mutual trust — perhaps the most vital ingredient in any virtual team's ability to succeed.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your virtual team about how to strengthen communication in their virtual teams.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: Communication in Your Virtual Team](#)

[Discussion Guide: Communication in Your Virtual Team](#)

[Discussion Slides: Communication in Your Virtual Team \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

Note: If your team contains only a few members who are leading virtual teams, you may want to partner with a colleague to co-lead this discussion for your combined groups.

Working through the discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

Start a Group Project

Just like any change effort, successfully incorporating new skills and behaviors into one's daily activities and habits takes time and effort. After reviewing or discussing the concepts in this topic, your direct reports will still need your support to fully apply new concepts and skills. They will need to overcome a variety of barriers including a lack of time, lack of confidence, and a fear of making mistakes. They will also need opportunities to hone their skills and break old habits. To help ensure their success, you can provide safe opportunities for individuals and your team as a whole to practice and experiment with new skills and behaviors on the job.

For example, to encourage the adoption of new norms, you can provide your team members with coaching, feedback, and additional time to complete tasks that require the use of new skills. Management approaches such as these will encourage team members to experiment with new skills until they become proficient.

Group learning projects provide another valuable technique for accelerating team members' development of new behaviors. A group learning project is an on-the-job activity aimed at providing team members with direct experience implementing their new knowledge and skills. Through a learning project, team members discover how new concepts work in the context of their situation, while simultaneously having a direct and tangible impact on the organization.

The documents below provide steps, tips, and a template for initiating a group learning project with your team, along with two project recommendations for this topic.

Download resources:

[Tips for Initiating and Supporting a Learning Project](#)

[Learning Project Plan Template](#)

[Learning Project: Evaluate Your Virtual Team's Effectiveness](#)

[Learning Project: Establish Technology Resources for Your Virtual Team](#)

Five Tips for Better Virtual Meetings

[Karen Boda and Rebecca Hinkle. "Five Tips for Better Virtual Meetings." *Harvard Management Update*, March 2008.](#)

[Download file](#)

Summary

Virtual meetings are a standard feature of today's business landscape, but they pose distinct obstacles that can undermine their effectiveness. For one thing, it's difficult to establish camaraderie—so essential to the natural flow of ideas—from a distance. This article outlines how to optimize the success of your virtual meetings by: (1) Making them more interactive; (2) Using technology to enhance communication and collaboration; (3) Knowing when to hold a virtual meeting and when not to; (4) Leveling the playing field so that every participant feels engaged; and (5) Establishing a zero-tolerance policy for e-mail and instant messaging.

Are Your Global Team Members Miles Apart?

[Howard M. Guttman. "Are Your Global Team Members Miles Apart?" *Harvard Management Update*, February 2007.](#)

[Download file](#)

Summary

Creating high-functioning teams is challenging under any circumstance. But when a team crosses national boundaries, time zones, and cultures, how do you meld individuals' different talents, temperaments, and communication styles? In this article, Howard M. Guttman, a consultant to Global Fortune 1000 companies, describes the three areas he and his colleagues at Guttman Development Strategies have found to be critical to creating a team whose performance transcends the limits imposed by culture and geography.

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